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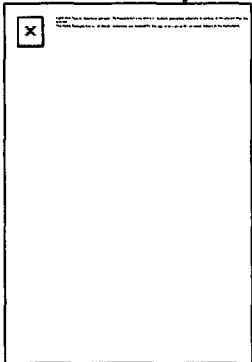
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The Return of Ghosts: Debating the rise of Geert Wilders and the far-right at the Nexus Symposium

On 11.18.10, By Max



The Nexus Institute's Return of Ghosts conference was inspired by the rise of far-right politician Geert Wilders in the Netherlands

I spent last week in Amsterdam, where I participated in the "Return of Ghosts" symposium of the Nexus Institute, a discussion/debate about the resurgence of neo-fascism in Europe and anti-democratic trends in the West. Besides providing a forum for debating European politics, the symposium was the occasion for the first public appearance in Europe by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa since he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature last month. The arrival of Vargas Llosa, one of the world's foremost intellectuals, resulted in an overflow crowd filled with members of the Dutch media, the country's political class, and the royal family.

Even with Vargas Llosa in the spotlight, the participants' attention was focused on Geert Wilders, the leader of the far-right Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, which is now the third leading party in the Netherlands. With his gathering influence, Wilders has essentially placed the Dutch coalition government in a stranglehold; the government meets with him every Wednesday to gauge his opinions and ask for his instructions. While Wilders dictates at will to the government, he remains independent of it, comfortably avoiding the consequences of policies he has helped to shape. It is the perfect position for a politician whose agenda is comprised exclusively of xenophobic populism, and typical strategy of the far-right in countries across the continent.

Wilders' base lies in the mostly Catholic south, where ironically few people have ever encountered a Muslim. He has also generated support in the city of Groeningen, once a citadel of the communists. Seeking to expand his base, Wilders promised to hire scores of "animal cops" to investigate and prosecute the abuse of animals, a clever wedge strategy in the only country I know of that has a party dedicated exclusively to animal rights. Of course, Wilders could care less about our furry friends. His stated goal is to end immigration not just to Holland but to all of Europe; ban the Quran (free speech is only for the "Judeo-Christian" community), and severely limit the rights of Muslim citizens of Europe by, for instance, instituting what he called a "head rag tax" on Muslim women. Wilders' international allies include the goosestepping neo-Nazis of the English Defense League, the far-right pogromist Pam Geller, the Belgian neo-fascist party Vlaams Belang, and a substantial portion of the US neocon elite. Over the course of just a few years, he has become perhaps the most influential Islamophobe in the world.

But does this make Wilders a fascist? Rob Riemen, the director of the Nexus Institute, thinks so. Riemen has just published a book entitled "De Eeuwige Terugkeer Van Het Fascisme," or "The Eternal Return of Fascism" (I eagerly await its English translation), dedicated to highlighting the danger of Wilders' eerily familiar brand of right-wing populism. In the book, Riemen urges readers to compare Wilders' politics to the early incarnations of European fascism, not to the genocidal terminal stage fascism of late World War II. He calls the parallels between Wilders and the early fascists "one-and-one." In an economic and civilizational crisis like the kind the Netherlands is facing, Riemen warns that reactionary figures like Wilders can easily seize power while centrist elements stand by politely and passively, refusing to call a spade a spade. Where Wilders' ascendancy will lead is unknown, but if he is not stopped in his tracks, Riemen is certain the

story will not end well. In the week after its publication, Riemen's book flew off the shelves, selling 5000 copies while generating heated reactions from across the spectrum of debate.

Riemen told me that despite the public enthusiasm for his book, his characterization of Wilders has been attacked as "un-Dutch." In Dutch culture, as in so many others, open confrontation is avoided at all cost. Political disagreement is welcomed only if it is expressed in a collegial manner, as though nothing more than reputations were at stake. So the Dutch cultural elite generally goes along to get along. The resistance Riemen has met since he called Wilders out seemed to have alarmed and frustrated him. Why was it so difficult for liberal elements in the Netherlands to recognize the clear resonances of fascism in Wilders' political style? he wondered. And why did they seem more concerned with regulating the terms of debate than with forming a united front against the far-right? Once the symposium opened and I was able to see the Dutch elite in action, I began to understand Riemen's indignation.

The symposium began with a speech by Vargas Llosa, a complex personality who has allied himself with center-right parties in Spain and elsewhere but whose politics remain fundamentally rooted in cultural liberalism. Vargas Llosa's differences with leaders of the left, which he used to belong to, exploded over the issue of free trade. He is an ardent neo-liberal and reviles Latin populists like Hugo Chavez and Ollanta Humala who advocate protectionism and industrial nationalization.

Vargas Llosa decorated his speech with literary metaphors and natural imagery to describe the challenges of democracy, particularly in Europe. But the body of the address was devoted to the supposed threat Islamic extremism posed to Western civilization. Vargas Llosa singled out suicide bombing as the most dangerous phenomenon, pointing to the Madrid and London bombings by al-Qaida inspired operatives, while curiously not mentioning suicide attacks by secular groups like the Tamil Tigers and the Kurdish PKK, or the nationalistic suicide terror by Palestinian militants (Vargas Llosa declared in his speech that "Israel deserves to be treated like any other nation," and has been harshly critical of the state in the past).

During the first panel, which I participated in, Fania Oz-Salzberger, an Israeli professor of history and the daughter of famed author Amos Oz, boasted to crowd of Israel's "vibrant democracy." She was enthusiastically seconded by Mitchell Cohen, a former editor of Dissent who has devoted considerable energy to assailing anti-Zionist Jews, writing that "the dominant species of anti-Semitism encourages anti-Zionism." I found it odd that neither expressed any concern over the almost endless stream of anti-democratic laws passing through the Knesset, or by the general authoritarian, anti-liberal trend in Israeli society. Oz-Salzberger went on to announce to a smattering of applause that "Geert Wilders and politicians like him are not welcomed by Israelis."

Yet Wilders is one of Israel's most frequent guests, having visited the country over 40 times in 20 years. In fact, he claims that his views on Islam and Arabs were forged while living on an Israeli moshav. "Nowhere did I have the special feeling of solidarity that I get when I land at Ben Gurion airport," he once said. Wilders reportedly receives heavy support from Dutch financial backers of Israel, and has met with a range of Israeli officials. His closest allies lie within the extremist settler movement, prompting him to call for the forced transfer of Palestinians to Jordan. Members of the liberal Zionist intelligensia like Oz-Salzberger may not want Wilders around, but who in Israel is listening to them? Israel's mainstream leadership echoes Wilders' crudest talking points on a regular basis, while the Zionist left clings to a dwindling handful of Knesset seats and watches passively — even resentfully — as a rag-tag band of leftist radicals fight for equality for all. Consider a recent statement by former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is seen as a centrist within the Israeli political spectrum: "The origin of terrorism is within Islam," Olmert declared this month.

The pro-Israel position of the new breed of European far-rightists has to be recognized as much more than a convenient political tactic. Of course, saying you "stand with Israel," as Wilders so often does, is an easy way to insulate yourself from charges of anti-Semitism. But the extreme right is also attracted to Israel because the country represents its highest ideals. While some critics see Israel as a racist apartheid state, people like Wilders see Israel as a racist apartheid state — and they like it. They richly enjoy when Israel mows down Arab Muslims by the dozens and tells the world to go to hell; they admire Israel's settler culture; and most of all, they yearn to live in a land like Israel that privileges its ethnic majority above all others to the point that it systematically humiliates and dispossesses the swarthy racial outclass. The endgame of the far-right is to make Europe less tolerant and more Israeli.

After the Italian philosopher Paolo Flores D'Arcais proclaimed that Italy was no longer a democratic country, citing PM Silvio Berlusconi's control over 90 percent of the country's media, the government's deep seated corruption and the Prime Minister's repeated attempts to impose onerous restrictions on journalistic freedom, Riemen asked me if the United States was a democracy given the the rapidly rising influence of corporations over the media and elections. After two panelists had described Israel as a vibrant democracy while another labeled Italy a non-democratic quasi-dictatorship, I decided that our definition of democracy was subjective at best. So I sidestepped the question and outlined a few of the greatest blows to American democracy, from the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine to the Telecommunications Deregulation Act to the Citizens United SCOTUS decision. Later in the evening, D'Arcais would remark to me with amazement that he never knew American media was ever regulated in the first place.

During the 20 minutes or so when students of Tilburg University were able to question the panel, one student asked whether suicide terror was a uniquely Islamic phenomenon, apparently referring to Vargas Llosa's address. I responded that it of course was not, citing the example of secular groups like the Tamil Tigers which brought the tactic into practice the second suicide. I recommended the audience review the research of Robert Pape, the University of Chicago political scientist who demonstrated a clear connection between the American and Israeli occupation of Middle Eastern countries and the motivations of suicide bombers. Oz-Salzberger jumped in, proclaiming that occupation has little or nothing to do

with the motives of suicide bombers. She did not marshal any evidence to support her point, possibly because our time was so limited. It would have been hard to do so, however, without supporting the fundamental argument of Wilders about Islam's inherent violence — or the even sillier theory by the Israeli filmmaker/professional hasbarist Pierre Rehov that suicide bombers are motivated by sexual repression.

Next, the Dutch panel took the stage. The main attraction was Frits Bolkstein, the longtime leader of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy who employed Wilders as his parliamentary aide, providing him a stepping stone to his political career. He was a silver haired curmudgeon from aristocratic stock who reminded me instantly of the "paleocon" characters I've met while covering white nationalist conventions like American Renaissance.

"Everything went wrong when the government became impressed in the 90's with the idea of the 'good stranger,'" Bolkstein declared. "If the previous governments had tightened their immigration laws, there would not have been a Mr. Wilders."

The only member of the panel to mount a significant challenge to Bolkstein was the Tilburg University professor Paul Frissen, who argued that the rule of law and basic standards of democracy protects "the right to be fundamentalist." The other panelists either gave Bolkstein's xenophobia a pass or attempted to surpass his resentment of Muslims. After Bolkstein lightly criticized Wilders' call for banning the Quran, remarking that "what he says about Islam is nonsense" because it contradicts the freedom of religion, AB Klink, a former Dutch senator and ex-Minister of Health, chimed in. "It's not nonsense because Islam is so different in its cultural values than ours," Klink claimed.

Then, when Bolkstein called for shutting down Islamic schools, Frissen reminded him that state-supported Christian schools in the Dutch Bible belt teach theocratic concepts as well. Meindert Fennema, the political biographer of Wilders, entered the debate to demand that *all* religious schools be closed. "I'm against all forms of religious teaching!" he proudly exclaimed, sending gales of applause through the audience. "How can you call yourself a liberal?" Frissen asked with a tone of exasperation. Fennema ignored him.

During question time, a young freelance writer from India named Natasha Ginwala asked Bolkstein to answer for the "ghost of neo-colonialism," which "the African people never voted for." She mentioned the exploitative deals forced on developing countries by transnational oil companies, possibly alluding to Bolkstein's role as a manager at Royal Dutch Shell in authoritarian countries like El Salvador, Indonesia, and Honduras during the 1970's (I'm sure nothing unseemly happened during Bolkstein's tenure in these places). Bolkstein's responded bluntly, "If these countries try to be self-sufficient it just doesn't work!"

After the symposium, I talked to Ginwala and a group of her friends, who were mostly immigrant students. They were appalled by the ignorance of the Dutch panelists. "None of them knew the first thing about Islam," an Arab student remarked. "They couldn't even pretend to understand what Muslims actually believe." Ginwala added, "How can Bolkstein tell me my country can't be self-sufficient? I come from India. It's one of the most diversified economies on the planet." I was not in Amsterdam long enough to do any formal reporting. However, I did notice that all of the immigrants I spoke to were closely and nervously following the rise of the right. At the airport, while waiting to board my flight, I talked to a 20-something security guard named Muhammad who seemed almost as bored as I was. Muhammad had spent his whole life in Amsterdam, but his parents were from Cairo, Egypt. He told me he wanted to take his girlfriend on a trip to New York City and Miami someday. When I brought up the topic of Wilders, he scoffed at his perception of Muslims. "Most of us aren't even religious," Muhammad said. "When I hear him talking about Muslims wanting to take over, I just laugh. I'm like, is this guy serious?"

But he did not underestimate Wilders' appeal. "Everything he does and everything he says, it seems like it's carefully planned. He obviously knows what he's doing. And they let him get away with it," Muhammad remarked. "Look, I'm just a citizen, I'm nobody, but if I say something about Christians or Jews that the government doesn't like, I'll be punished. But when Wilders, who is a public official, says all the things he says about Muslims, nothing happens to him. Instead, more and more people are voting for him."